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**The
Ica Stones**

**The Truth
on an archæological
Myth**

BUSTED!

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According to geological evidence, the Age of Dinosaurs and the Age of Man are separated by roughly 60 million years. That has not deterred the dream-spinners of Hollywood from supposing that dinosaurs survived into the present (*The Lost World*), or that they can be genetically recreated (*Jurassic Park*). Other movies in this genre have played with the idea that, somehow, man and the dinosaurs may have co-existed. Filip Coppens suggests that the still enigmatic Ica Stones are the archæological equivalent of the movie *One Million Years BC*. Additional material by Bob Rickard and Philippe Aubron Mezanges.

Our story has several possible beginnings, but we'll start on 13 May 1966 in Ica, the capital town of a small Peruvian coastal province, some 186 miles (300 km) south of the capital Lima. It was the 42nd birthday of a local physician, Dr Javier Cabrera Darquea and his old friend, photographer Felix Llosa Romero, had presented him with a seemingly innocent gift – a curiously marked stone.

Dr Cabrera – who had a long-standing interest in the prehistory of the region – examined the design on the stone and identified it as a species of fish that had become extinct millions of years ago. News of his excitement reached the ears of Carlos and Pablo Soldi, brothers and well-known collectors of pre-Inca artifacts. They showed Cabrera thousands of similarly-marked stones found in the nearby Ocucaje region and told him that they had repeatedly failed to interest archæologists in investigating the area. Cabrera bought 341 stones from them for the equivalent of UK£30.

Cabrera's private museum includes a collection of stones belonging to his father – Bolivia Cabrera, a Spanish aristocrat – gathered from the fields of the family plantation in the late 1930s. They resembled his new acquisitions and soon he found another supplier – a farmer named Basilo Uschuya – and bought many thousands more from him. By the late 1970s, Cabrera estimates, he had over 11,000 of these anomalous engraved stones.

The stones vary in size from pebbles to hefty boulders and have a dark patina into which the designs are incised. They bear an astonishing variety of images (including some showing bestiality which have been described as “pornographic”) and Cabrera has arranged his collection into groups, including star maps, maps of unidentified lands, scenes of complex surgery, men using telescopes to observe stars and comets, and what seem to be humans in flying machines. Here, too, are depictions that challenge the accepted view of the history of life on Earth. They show people interacting with extinct animals; hunting and domesticating a variety of dinosaurs, in particular the brontosaurus, Tyrannosaurus rex, stegosaurus and flying pterodactyls. According to connoisseurs, the real gem of the dinosaur series is a scene in which men use hand-axes to kill a dinosaur. What impresses, they say, is that the hunters seem to display a knowledge of the animal's anatomy in chopping at a critical nerve centre in the dinosaur's spine that would inflict a quick and sudden death.

Cabrera's medical career was distinguished – he'd retired as professor and head of the Department of Medicine at the University of Lima – so it is natural that, at first, he

kept quiet about his 'dinosaur stones', preferring to draw attention to those that displayed advanced scientific knowledge, such as the astronomical and medical images. The 'surgery stones' imply – if you believe Cabrera's supporters – that the makers possessed an advanced knowledge of medicine millions of years before the earliest modern civilization, for here, in gory detail, are scenes of heart, liver and kidney transplants, a caesarean-section, brain operation, sophisticated equipment, acupuncture and genetic engineering. In short, this highly controversial 'library in stone' is an archæological anomaly – a prime example of what the fortean pioneer Ivan Sanderson called 'oops-art' or out-of-place artefacts.

In the late 1960s – after he had bought thousands of the engraved stones from the farmer Basilo Uschuya – Cabrera tirelessly promoted his 'discovery', telling anyone who would listen about his speculations... and it soon came to the attention of revisionists like Erich von Däniken and Robert Charroux. Predictably, the Ica artifacts shot up the hit parade of the 'ancient astronaut' school, which enthusiastically embraces any discovery that can be used to suggest that a highly-developed ancient culture existed where none was supposed to; and the more bizarre or anomalous the discovery, the more likely it was, in their view, to have extraterrestrial origins.

Riding in the slipstream of von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods?* – a world-wide best-seller in 1969 – a spate of similar books emerged in the early 1970s, almost all of them including the Ica enigma. Most claimed it was clear, if puzzling, evidence of an advanced civilization from a time before the dinosaurs perished 65 million years ago.

More recently, Creationists – who place biblical ‘truth’ above Darwinian theory – have used the Ica stones to substantiate their beliefs that the ‘behemoth’ of the Book of Job is, in fact, a dinosaur. Rejecting the mooted antiquity of the stones, they believe the stones show, instead, that dinosaurs survived into relatively modern times, co-existing with early man, and offer proof of the Genesis account of the Creation some six millennia ago.

According to the reigning scientific opinion, a span of some 60 million years separates the living dinosaurs from our earliest human ancestors. This huge gap in time, supported by geological evidence and modern dating methods, makes the idea of the co-existence of dinosaurs and man hard to entertain scientifically. In addition, the theoretical consequences of accepting the validity of the Ica stones are equally difficult. For example, if humans existed that far back, how did they survive the several global cataclysms that contributed to the demise of the dinosaurs and huge percentages of other extant life-forms? If dinosaurs lived into the Modern Era, why did they suddenly disappear?

Then, it seems, the bubble burst. A BBC TV documentary was severely critical of the Ica stones, drawing the attention of the Peruvian press and resulting in the arrest of Uschuya by the local authorities. Interrogated, he soon admitted he had carved the stones himself; he wanted to bilk the tourists and claimed he never thought it would get out of hand on such a large scale. After his release, Uschuya continued to make and sell stones, presumably with official knowledge.

The Ica stones were a hoax and officially a branch of the

tourist industry. It was over... or was it? When dealing with controversies of this sort, nothing is ever simple. Believers in the antiquity of the stones claimed that the farmer admitted to the hoax for a very simple reason: if the stones were genuine, he had been selling government possessions. Peruvian law dictates that archæological discoveries should be turned over to the government and he faced prison if found guilty. By admitting it was a simple hoax, the farmer was let off the hook... and was able to provide his family with an income. When von Däniken visited the farmer in 1973, Uschuya confirmed to him that he had faked the stones; but later on, in an interview with the German journalist Andreas Fischer, Uschuya claimed the opposite. They were genuine, he insisted, and he admitted to a hoax to avoid imprisonment.

It is sometimes alleged against Cabrera that he colluded in the making of fakes and must have profited from them but there is no evidence of that. In any case, Cabrera's original motive, to preserve the stones, is clear from the record. Along with the Soldi brothers, he tried to attract the attention of a top-level archæological investigation into what he believed was a genuine pre-Incan mystery. The Soldis' interest began in 1961 when, according to Herman Buse, the Ica River flooded and "uncovered in the Ocucaje region a large number of engraved stones which ever since have been an object of commerce for the huaqueros who found them."

Also interested in the objects was an architect, Santiago Agurto Calvo, then rector of the Universidad Nacional de Ingenieria, who bought many and, in 1966, began excavating pre-Inca tombs around Ocucaje. In an article

that year, he described the designs as “Unidentifiable things, insects, fish, birds, cats, fabulous creatures and human beings [...] in elaborate and fantastic compositions.”

In 1968, Calvo donated a great number of engraved stones to the Ica museum but failed to have the province’s cultural department declare the Ocucaje region a special preserve to prevent the illegal removal of ancient objects.

The earliest Peruvian artifacts seem to date back to around 20,000 years ago, and discoveries of engraved stones in the Ica region go back to Spanish records of the mid-15th century. The curator of the Ica museum accepted Calvo’s collection at first as examples of pre-Inca burial art, but they were withdrawn from open display in 1970, when Cabrera’s ideas gained international notoriety. When Cabrera visited the museum to compare his artifacts with Calvo’s, the curator said he withdrew them because he now believed the huaqueros (grave-robbers) had made them.

Despite Uschuya’s damning admission, Cabrera continued to feed the “cult of the dinosaur stones” – he called them ‘gliptoliths’ – and became their biggest promoter. He put his collection on display in his house. Shelves line every wall, organized by subject: the races of the planet, ancient animals, lost continents, etc. Arguing for their genuine origins cast Cabrera into the camp of the von Dänikenites; this is both comical and ironic as von Däniken himself has written that he believes the stones are most likely fakes. Cabrera devoted more and more time to deciphering the images and came to

astonishing conclusions “in strange and difficult circumstances”.

Cabrera considered that his hypothetical ancient people – Gliptolithic Man – had larger brains than ours (even though no skeletal remains exist) and were therefore more intelligent than us. These humans supposedly used a form of concentrated psychic energy with which they were able to influence celestial events, and record on their stones, the approach of a great comet. Further, he believed that some of the ‘machines’ depicted look like spacecraft and probably travelled through space “without consuming fuel.” Other designs echoed the great images laid out on the plains of Nazca – so, he concluded that Nazca really was an ancient spaceport.

Now, Cabrera ascends into a realm all his own, leaving behind his puzzled and more conventional colleagues for the increasing isolation of his contemplation among the strange stones. He believes he has come to know what they are saying. “I can only deduce,” he writes, “that the men who carved these stones co-existed with these animals. This means, of course, that man is at least 405 million years old.”

According to him, Gliptolithic Man came to Earth to genetically engineer the ancestors of the human race and left Earth before the impact of the Great Comet 65 million years ago, leaving their intellectual legacy on indestructible stones. Cabrera theorized that they took off from the Nazca plains – their craft fired from electromagnetic launchers – to travel to a planet in the Pleiades. Some of the stones, he says, show the hemispheres of that distant planet as well as other places

in the Universe where life existed... which would imply a fair bit of space traffic prior to the catastrophe.

Cabrera's reading of the stones has little support; especially as the engraved images lend themselves to other, less dramatic, interpretations and there is not enough corroborating detail to substantiate any of them. For example, even if we assume they are genuine and millions of years old, they do not necessarily contain the type of information Cabrera maintains; the heart and brain transplants could just as well be mutilations or acts of cannibalism; and the "flying machines" resemble birds more than high-tech craft. The American archaeologist-publisher David Hatcher Childress said, half in jest, that the scene showing ancients using telescopes could equally show them playing a game of prehistoric tennis. 5

On 25 February 1996, NBC TV showed a documentary titled *The Mysterious Origins of Man*. It marshalled evidence seeming to support the idea that there have been civilizations far older than the earliest accepted ones and that the eras of man and the dinosaurs overlapped. Neil Steede – an independent archaeologist and director of the Early Sites Research Society – was one of its researchers who, in 1995, travelled throughout Southern America, gathering material for the programme. He investigated the Ica stones first hand, but thought they should not be included in the original documentary because they did not add any scientific weight to the debate.

In 1997, the documentary's producer, Bill Cote, decided to cash in on two controversial items dropped from the original broadcast. The segment concerning the Ica

stones was called Jurassic Art and was marketed for cable television and the video sales market. The production centred on Steede's research as he was the latest archæologist to investigate the collection. When Steede met Basilo Uschuya, the farmer confirmed that he had engraved the stones from drawings that Cabrera had brought to him. Why? "Making these stones is easier than farming the land." Uschuya stated that Cabrera had about 5000 'genuine' stones – ie. stones that Uschuya himself had not made – and that he had not fabricated all of the others, contrary to what he had previously stated. We have no clues as to who else might be making these stones.

Cabrera explained Uschuya's implication by admitting that a large number of stones had indeed been copied, but they were only for sale to tourists. There is of course little harm in creating replicas; a position most museums will be happy to agree with. Doubters will argue that Cabrera only confessed to his part in these forged stones when faced with his accomplice's statement – so how can we rely on any of his other statements? We also wonder whether Cabrera had asked anyone else to fabricate stones. Cabrera continues to maintain that his stones are genuine and that there is still a hoard of genuine stones, whose secret location is guarded by Uschuya and others. Cabrera claims he was shown a cave in which the cache of stones had remained hidden for millions of years. This cave was revealed, he says, after a severe rainstorm washed open a new area near the Ica river. (This may or may not be the event referred to by Herman Buse in 1965.) Cabrera remains tight-lipped on who took him to the cave and as no maps or pictures of it exist we have only Cabrera's word for it. Cabrera has stated that he

hopes it will not be found. Even Erich von Däniken, who describes Cabrera as a “warm friend”, was denied the privilege. Steede, who offered to be blindfolded throughout the journey to the cave, was also rebuffed and now believes the cave never existed.

Surely, you ask, couldn't the matter be settled once and for all by dating the stones? Unfortunately, though some testing was done, the results remain inconclusive. Cabrera himself sent stones to the Universities of Lima (Peru) and Bonn (Germany) and to NASA scientist (and ancient astronaut buff) Joseph Blum. At Bonn, a Professor Frenchen apparently confirmed that the stones were andesite (an extremely hard volcanic rock composed mostly of silica) and that the oxidized patina on their surface indicated “significant” age.

In 1967, Cabrera asked friend Eric Wolf, a mining engineer, to arrange an analysis and published the results in his book. The stones were indeed andesite, worn smooth in ancient rivers. “I have not found any notable or irregular wear on the edges of the incisions,” Wolf notes, concluding: “These etchings were executed not long before they were deposited in graves or other places where they were discovered.”⁶ Cabrera adds, specifically, that “the coating of natural oxidation covers the incisions as well.” This would suggest the stones were indeed ancient. However, this has to be balanced by the first-hand observation by Neil Steede that, even though the stones he examined did have this patina, there was no patina in the grooves. This suggests that while the stones were certainly very old, the carvings were clearly of far more recent origin.

While some investigators claim that they were refused

permission to see the Calco collection in the Museum of Ica stash, Neil Steede was granted access. He concluded that these “definitely genuine” stones show a finer workmanship and have less deep cuts than Cabrera’s stones. This is a clear indication of a more highly skilled manufacturer than Cabrera’s artisan. Furthermore, they are restricted to depicting conventional humans and existing animals, not extinct animals; nor do they include any examples of the more exotic motifs of the Cabrera stones.

In the same year that the *Mysterious Origins of Man* documentary aired, the German cable channel Kabel 1 broadcast its own investigation. The team had filmed secretly as Cabrera took them into one of his ‘secret’ rooms. Here, instead of incised stones, were astonishing clay sculptures: small dinosaurs crawling out of an egg, kangaroos, people with odd-shaped heads and other similar themes. The team decided to confront Basilo Uschuya with this new footage. He claimed to have made these sculptures as well, for what in his opinion was a minimum salary, and showed the team such a sculpture, which seemed indistinguishable from those in Cabrera’s secret room.

The story became stranger when, that same year, Erich von Däniken launched the German version of his book *Arrival of the Gods*, in which he reported on his 1996 trip to Peru... and said that Cabrera had allowed him to visit and photograph the figurines! Von Däniken stated that he was first shown these clay figures during his visit in 1983. The point is that, unlike the stones, these clay figurines can be tested. Von Däniken sent one to the University of Zurich for carbon-dating and they reported that the

figurine was modern. His fellow researcher, Johannes Fiebag, sent two other samples to the University of Weimar who, likewise, concluded that the samples were “relatively young” and still contained water. Conclusion: these figurines were not “a hundred thousand” years old, as Cabrera claimed; they could have been made 20 years ago.

It is quite possible for the engraved stones, if authentic, to have a simple anthropological origin. An alternative explanation – not considered by Cabrera or others – is that the engravings are votive renderings by the tribe’s shaman; after all, the dream-flight of the shaman is, in many cultures, linked to the flight of birds. Could not a shaman have picked up a dinosaur bone (which can be found easily in the area), entered a trance, connected with the bone’s previous owner and seen the dinosaur age in a vision?

It seems increasingly likely that the Ica stones have been fabricated, but it is difficult to believe that they are all – estimates run to 50,000 pieces – made by one poor, uneducated farmer. No independent study has been made, if only to separate any possibly authentic artifacts from the fakes. Nor do we know to what extent Cabrera’s interpretations have been based on any of the fakes. The one researcher who has known Cabrera the longest, Erich von Däniken, has repeatedly stated that some stones are definitely fakes. He has also cast doubt on the origins of the entire collection. In the end, perhaps von Däniken understands Cabrera’s motive best. He is convinced Cabrera tells stories: “And stories is the right word, for they do not fit in with any scientific scheme of things. The old man uses engravings which he must

know are fake to substantiate his beliefs. Why? Has he become so enamoured of his own theories that he thinks imitations will back them up?"

Cabrera's interest in medicine and archæology might have made him susceptible to an ingenious fraud, but if so he is not the one who has profited from it. Or perhaps he has fooled himself, seeing evidence of his wishful thinking everywhere. In 1966, the media were rife with the theme of men and dinosaurs interacting, especially in the movie *One Million Year BC* (1966). Was Cabrera inspired by this? Or was he inspired by the so-called 'Acambaro figurines', named after their place of origin in Mexico where, in 1925, Waldemar Julsrud, a Danish storekeeper, found hundreds of clay figurines of dinosaurs which – like their Ica counterparts some 40 years later – are cavorting with men? 9 Clearly, more research must be done to settle the doubts about the Ica stones.

Now 77 years old, Cabrera remains the sole custodian of the enigma and seems to enjoy the position. Without giving anything away, he still offers a jovial welcome to visitors to the Museo Cabrera – his own Jurassic Library. It is, he is convinced, "the most important legacy of our time."

The BBC connection

In 1977, two producers for BBC TV travelled to Peru to film a number of stories for a programme called 'Pathways to the Gods', in the Chronicle series. Tony Morrison and Ray Sutcliffe, who specialize in film reportage from South America, were chiefly interested in ancient trackways and the Nazca lines, but included the

mystery of the Ica stones. Morrison – who has visited Peru on a regular basis since 1961 – went on to write the book *Pathways to the Gods* (1978). He was told by local informants that, despite the esteem with which Cabrera was originally regarded, his ‘crazy’ ideas had isolated him and created some bad feeling in the community. Sutcliffe told FT that they had located and filmed Basilo Uschuya, the only forger of the stones ever identified. Uschuya’s homestead stood out from those surrounding it as the only one with a TV mast and an electricity generator. Far from being an illiterate peasant, Sutcliffe said Uschuya was intelligent, proud of his achievement and had “a great sense of humor.” He proved it to the TV crew by taking a fresh stone about an inch a half long – its patina the result of being baked in cow dung and massaged with boot polish – powered up his dentist’s drill and carved an ‘ancient’ legend of ‘BBC TV’.

Today, the stone sits on Sutcliffe’s desk as one of the most unusual paperweights in the world.